DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 895 CG 003 951

By-Aceto, Thomas D.

Direct Action and the Democratic Process.

American Univ., Washington, D.C.; Eastern Regional Inst. for Education, Syracuse, N.Y.

Pub Date 31 Mar 69

Note-13p.; Paper was presented at the American Personnel and Guidance Association Convention, Las Vegas, Nevada, March 31, 1969.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.75

Descriptors-*Adoption (Ideas), *Change Agents, Colleges, *College Students, Educational Innovation, Social Change, Student Behavior, *Student College Relationship, Student Problems, *University Administration

A study conducted at eleven midwestern universities investigated the appropriateness of direct action as a means of changing university policies. Interviewed subjects (six) voiced their opinions about student use of direct action tactics to initiate change in three broad areas: (1) academic issues, (2) personal and social conduct issues and, (3) freedom of expression issues. Results showed: (1) deans of students saw direct action tactics as never being appropriate, (3) student government presidents and newspaper editors saw such tactics as inappropriate for academic issues, somewhat appropriate for personal and social behavior issues and more appropriate for freedom of expression issues. The author supports the necessity for occasional power confrontations and conflicts to serve as a medium through which problems can be aired, solutions arrived at, and a "root for necessary change on campuses". Implications for the role of student personnel workers in this area are discussed. (LS)

ED030895

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

CG 003951

DIRECT ACTION AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS*

Thomas D. Aceto
Eastern Regional Institute for
Education and Syracuse University

This afternoon I would like to briefly report my findings in a research study conducted on the campuses of eleven major public and private universities located in the midwest, relative to the appropriateness of direct action as a means to initiating or to changing university policies.

Utilizing an adaptation of the model employed by Williamson and Cowan in their study of students' freedom of expression, I conducted in-depth interviews with six persons on each of the eleven campuses: the dean of students, the AAUP chapter president, the student government president, the AWS president, the student newspaper editor, and the SDS chapter president. They were asked to assess the appropriateness of various direct action tactics (ranging from harassment to actual obstruction) in student attempts to bring about change in some twenty policy areas which have been targets for organized student protest in recent years. In evaluating the responses, the twenty policy areas were grouped into the three broad areas of academic issues, personal and social conduct issues, and freedom of expression issues.

As any fairly alert, fairly intelligent observer of the university scene would have informed you without having gone through the time, effort, and expense that I expended in gathering my data, deans of students perceived direct action tactics as never, under any set of circumstances whatsoever, being appropriate tactics for

*Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Personnel and Guidance Association, Las Vegas, Nevada, March 31, 1969

attempting to bring about a change of policy on the campus. While the SDS presidents couldn't conceive of an issue when direct action would not be appropriate, the other four groups fell at intermediate points on the continuum.

Naturally the AAUP presidents abhorred the thought of direct action as a means to press an academic matter, but for changing policies outside of their domain of vested interest they tended to be far more tolerant.

The remaining three groups, student government presidents, AWS presidents, and newspaper editors, felt that direct action was generally an inappropriate tactic when related to academic issues, somewhat appropriate as a means to press for changes in policies governing student personal and social behavior, and considerably more appropriate when attempting to change policies governing student political and/or freedom of expression issues. Rather than bore you at this time with tons of hard data which only have meaning and significance for people who delight in serving on doctoral committees, I want to share with you some of the statements made by those interviewed, and identify some of the more subtle nuances which further explicate the differences and similarities of opinion among the six groups interviewed.

Almost all of the respondents differentiated between direct action intended to (1) voice an opinion, air a grievance or solicit support for a point of view (harassment type tactics), and direct action intended to (2) force a point of view through defiance or obstruction. Consequently, a boycott, picket, or demonstration was generally perceived as allowable (if not always appropriate) while

a sit-in was generally rejected except, as noted earlier, by the SDS presidents. Six respondents (four deans and two AAUP presidents) felt that any form of direct action was inappropriate as a tactic for students to use in attempting to alter any type of university policy. A typical comment here was: "I tolerate such tactics as pickets and rallies, but I don't feel they are genuinely a part of the conception of how the university ought to resolve its problems." Some exceptions to this notion that only rational means were appropriate for initiating change on the campus are reflected in this statement by an AAUP president:

> The feeling that direct action has no place on the campus is academic self-glorification. However, I support the ideal that understanding is good; and that mutual respect and alternative solutions must be considered; that we must search for maximum gain and minimal detriment to all parties involved. These things as the underlying ethic and spirit of the academic and political community are good. But, power may be necessary in order to get the other person to listen, to get him to the bargaining table. However, it should not be used beyond that.

Another AAUP president responded that "limiting the resolving of conflicts to rational means is a little unrealistic. There's a need for full spectrum of living on the campus and living involves emotion." A SG president said: "I don't buy the dean's position that direct action has no place on the campus. There's little doubt that the administration will use force whenever it's to its best interests. So why can't students use non-violent force? Administrators at Berkeley didn't hesitate to call in the police. Isn't that force?"

Now a SDS president is speaking: "You know the committee considerations aren't always rational and reasonable. It gives that semblance, but the administration and faculty use subtle power to

keep an upper hand." Another SDS president explained: "Since all authority in the university is from the top-down, and if you have an obdurate president and and board of trustees who are unwilling to yield, who are not playing by the democratic rules of the game, then these direct action tactics are legitimate. Direct action forces the university to enter into dialogue."

Somewhat related to the notion that rational persuasion is more appropriately the norm in university decision-making was the strongly supported sentiment that direct action ought to be held in reserve, to be used only as a "last resort;" only after the normal channels and rational persuasion had failed. The deans, in supporting this position, were thinking primarily of harassment type tactics and not obstructive tactics.

The SDS presidents and a small number of the others interviewed felt that direct action might very well be used previous to or concurrently with efforts through the established channels. A SDS president felt that "these tactics are often needed to get the ball rolling. The administration will not consider a change unless it is pushed." An AAUP president stated: "A good healthy rally prior to an impasse can be a good thing. The administration deliberately uses the committee system to delay issues, to wait them out." Another AAUP president was of the opinion the "students should explore the regular channels first, but if the history is that the channels do not work, there is no need to try again." A third AAUP president was not very optimistic about students utilizing normal channels to bring about change. He said:

> I see no way for students to function through the appropriate channels for three reasons: (1) students have little political power, they are transient and here only a short period of time; (2) committees are not appropriate for student involvement because students are intimidated by the faculty; and (3) the university is a complicated organization and present channels are too indirect and stuffy. They are really no more than a way to manipulate students.

One SDS president gave a rather interesting reason for supporting the initial use of normal channels. He suggested that "it's an excellent way of showing that the established channels are not working, and this legitimizes our use of direct action."

What appeared to be coming through loud and clear as I analyzed and re-analyzed my data and as I reflected back on the many hours of interviewing deans, faculty members, and student leaders, was that although some of the tactics of direct action may be allowable under the letter of the law, and still other tactics if not allowable at least defensible within the spirit of civil disobedience (as outlined by Dr. Harding earlier in this symposium), the prevailing opinion seemed to be that all types of direct action tactics somehow violate the spirit of the democratic mode for resolving conflict and differences, particularly on the university campus where a commitment to the democratic process (i.e., rational discussion and persuasion) should prevail. This notion, then, that direct action tactics and the democratic method are antithetical and incompatible seemed worthy of attention and study.

A leader in American pragmatic thought who has given much attention to this problem of method in a democratic society is Max Otto. In his chapter in PHILOSOPHY IN AMERICAN EDUCATION (1945), Otto sets forth a summary of main features of democratic method

as he conceives it. He calls it the method of "creative bargaining," and his conception has won the approval of many educational thinkers, including Boyd Bode. Otto states:

> What concerns us is the nature of creative bargaining. This does imply a 'getting together,' but the getting together is for a specific purpose, and that purpose is to wrestle with a controversial situation in order that it may be made to yield the largest return of good for all who have a stake in the outcome. Through such an approach men gain in the understanding of a difficulty or a controversy in the process of trying to remove or settle it.
>
> The differentiating marks (of creative bargaining) are these: (1) an honest attempt to appreciate the aims of conflict and their relation to the circumstances responsible for just those aims; (2) the search for a new set of aims in which the conflicting ones may be absorbed; and (3) the invention of a workable program through which the new set of aims can come to fruition.

Otto describes this method as a pattern of democracy in action, and states that there is a genuine spiritual quality about the effort to turn conflict into cooperation and substitute the method of conference and creative resolution of difficulties for reliance on force and direct action. He goes on to state that there is no theoretical or practical reason why it cannot be made to work over the whole range of conflicting purposes and in every type of human interaction (the university notwithstanding).

Sidney Hook takes the position that since the university is not a political community, the letter of democracy need not prevail and consequently the application of the principles of civil disobedience (i.e., direct action) is "fundamentally misconceived."(1)

(1) Hook, Sidney. "The War Against the Democratic Process," THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, February 1969, p. 47

Even within a political democracy Hook concedes civil disobedience or defiance as acceptable only "on a matter of the gravest moral importance." He states that the "democrat" cannot make every law of which he disapproves...a matter of conscientious brooding, of potential commitment to civil disobedience or defiance. (Hook, p. 46). Although Hook allows that the spirit of democracy ought to prevail in the university setting (meaning that persons should be heard, listened to, consulted with), he cannot understand why "if students have the right to speech--which, in effect, means they can talk to faculty and administration about anything--and can make a reasonable case, do they need to be encouraged to resort to direct action?" (Hook, p. 47).

What can be said in response to Hook's question? Why does direct action seem to be so necessary for student activists to accomplish their goals on the campus? Could there possibly be a flaw or incompleteness in the interpretation that Otto and Hook give to the notion of democratic method?

John Childs, another pragmatist in the Dewey tradition, contends that an adequate democratic method must be able to meet two basic tests: First, does the method take account of the salient features of the actual social process by which democratic values, as we now enjoy, have been secured? Second, is the method competent to deal with some of the most crucial conflicts that now confront American democracy and education?"

In his chapter in the JOHN DEWEY SOCIETY TWELFTH YEARBOOK, Childs assesses the creative bargaining method and concludes that this conception fails to take adequate account of the role of

power and struggle in the development of democratic civilization. He notes:

> Without in any way minimizing the power of group discussion and the use of objective evidence, the fact remains that many things become 'reasonable' and 'negotiable' only when they are supported by sufficient force.
>
> . The moral is that we must not oppose creative bargaining to power factors. Indeed, the practice of creative discussion gets its opportunity in those situations in which other modes of power have produced the disposition among the various parties involved in the conflict to see what can be done through cooperative discussion and inquiry.

Our history as a people is replete with examples of issues becoming reasonable and negotiable only after more direct kinds of power and sanctions had been applied by the group making the appeal: e.g., the civil rights sit-ins of the early 1960's; the labor union strikes in the 1930's; the open defiance of the suffragettes; the abolitionists, and the patriots who began the American Revolution with a variety of acts on non-cooperation against what were known as the Intolerable Acts. More recently and more relevant to our discussion here today, there now appears to be general agreement that the political rules at Berkeley in 1964 were much too harsh and repressive. Yet it took three months of demonstrations, sit-ins, and a strike to make that issue reasonable and negitiable. Note Mario Savio's 1965 statement: "In September to get the attention of this bureaucracy which had issued arbitrary edicts supressing student political expression and refused to discuss its action, we held a sit-in on the campus. We sat around a police car and kept it immobilized for 32 hours. At last, the administrative bureaucracy agreed to negotiate."

There also appears to be agreement now that Columbia University's plan to build a new gymnasium on public park property in Harlem was ill-considered and that Columbia's ancient, authoritarian decision-making process prevented the issues posed by the planned construction from being fully explored or resolved. Again student protest on a massive scale was required before the issues involved became eligible for "reason" and "negotiation."

Morton Deutsch, writing in the recent issue of the JOURNAL OF SOCIAL ISSUES notes that harassment and ultimately obstruction and destruction may be the only effective strategies available to a low power group if it faces an indifferent or hostile high power group. Deutsch includes the issue of student unrest and protest on the campus as a part of his discussion on productive versus destructive conflict and notes that it is obvious that the processes of social change will be disorderly and destructive unless those in power are able or enabled to lower their defensiveness and resistance to change in their relative status.

Student personnel workers can be thought of as a "low power" group on the campus. Few of us engage in the kind of scholarly research activity which the reward system of the university values highly and upon which it awards status and power. Consequently we have very little real prestige, status, or power except that which others may be willing to grant us from time to time. When the lines are drawn and the bayonets fixed on any given campus struggle, we find that we have accountability without authority, and responsibility without the power to solve the problem, even if we did have the correct solution. Whatever power and authority

we may have had in the past was pretty much directed toward controlling student out-of-class behavior, and we can be thankful that, for the most part, that era is history.

But what shall take its place? If we are indeed a "low power" group on the campus and current campus conflict appears to be couched in terms of a competitive power struggle, what are the alternatives open to us as we engage in the battle? (By the way, if you have any doubts about student personnel workers being a "low power" group, just ask the next student you see.)

I guess one alternative is to bemoan our present condition and long for the "good old days" when we had full, if not always benevolent, control over campus life. This is hardly an alternative which will lead to a positive restructuring of the problem.

We could "opt out" either personally (e.g., moving to a teaching appointment) or as a professional group, recognizing that our clinical psychology approach to campus conflict is inadequate and hence we will retreat to our counseling centers and work in a proverbial "one-to-one" relationship. This may be a viable alternative for some members of the profession, but it seems unlikely that the entire group would move in this direction.

We could join forces with the faculty and use our faculty rank and tenure as a means to prestige and power but that might require that we engage in the research and publication game for which some of us lack the "stomach" while others lack the necessary expertise in a given discipline. This alternative is lacking in creditability in that a number of us already have faculty rank and find that it does little to enhance our position on the campus.

We now come to a fourth alternative which I feel holds the greatest promise for student personnel workers to contribute to the resolution of campus problems, that of the student personnel worker as a disinterested "third party" committed to telling it "like it is."

Taking this position requires that one begins by "confessing all," by admitting that we have been a party to a rather rigid and narrow definition of the democratic method, that we have used the system of hearings and committees not to expedite change but to slow it down, that we have required students and student governments to adhere to formal decision-making processes while not making the same absolute requirement of ourselves, the faculty, the president, the board of trustees, or wealthy alumni. We should admit that in the past we had a stake in terms of power, prestige and status in controlling student life on the campus but that we're now ready for a new ball game with new rules which are designed to respect the integrity, dignity, and worth of all participants, including the students.

These new rules also include a more accurate and realistic definition of the democratic method applied to the university decision-making process; a method that does not deny the existence of and, occasionally, the necessity for power confrontations and conflict but utilizes these forces to prevent stagnation, to stimulate interest and curiosity among all campus participants to campus issues, to serve as the medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at, and as a root for necessary change on the campus. As social psychologists have long recognized, conflict is not inherently pathological or destructive. Its very

pervasiveness suggests that it has many positive functions, and it ought not to be looked upon as being incompatible to the way problems are solved on the university campus.

Now before I am misunderstood as suggesting that all campus problems should be resolved within a competitive arena of power confrontations and conflict, let me boldly state that I am a firm supporter of the notion that a mutually cooperative orientation is likely to be the most productive for resolving campus problems. I believe that a cooperative process is much more likely to produce many of the characteristics that are conducive to creative problem-solving: openness, lack of defensiveness, full utilization of all resources.

However, the purpose of this symposium is to focus upon the concept of civil disobedience and direct action as it applies to the university setting, and consequently my discussion has been limited to the consideration of that topic.

Let me close with a disclaimer: I am not so naive as to believe that taking an honest, "third party" position with students in terms of the way decisions have been made and are being made by "high power" groups (faculty, presidents, boards of trustees) on the campus (i.e., the use of delaying tactics, threats, sanctions, force, "violence") will in and of itself necessarily improve the campus climate. It may very well increase student use of force and direct action tactics initially, and it may create a need for an even higher tolerance level for ambiguity and cognitive dissonance among student personnel workers. But ultimately the results should be positive as we begin to level with one another and

learn how to use conflict and confrontation as legitimate features of the democratic method of solving problems of shared concern.